

# Chapter 4

## A Dead Sea Scroll: The Essenes' Manual of Discipline

(50 B.C.E.- A.D.100)

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### Introduction

Much of what historians have learned about Hebrew society and especially the sect known as the Essenes comes from the Dead Sea Scrolls, from which this selection is extracted. The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in a cave in Palestine in 1947 and have been the source of much controversy within the historical community ever since. The Scrolls are most valued for the information they provide on the Essenes, a radical sect that emerged about the time of Jesus. This movement detested the current state of affairs in Israel, both the Roman domination and the apparent (to the Essenes) decline of religious values among the Jews. Like other sects of that era, the Essenes believed that the time of the Messiah was close at hand. They believed they could hasten the coming of the Messiah by removing themselves from decadent, secularized society and by strictly observing Jewish law and a near ascetic existence. Their Manual of Discipline, excerpted here, gives a glimpse into that disciplined existence.

### Questions to Consider

- What must a person do in order to be counted among the Essenes?
- Are there any similarities between the doctrine of the Essenes and that of Christianity?

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Anyone who refuses to enter the (ideal) society of God and persists in walking in the stubbornness of his heart shall not be admitted to this community of God's truth. For inasmuch as his soul has revolted at the discipline entailed in a knowledge of God's righteous judgments, he has shown no real strength in amending his way of life, and therefore cannot be reckoned with the upright. The mental, physical and material resources of such a man are not to be introduced into the stock of the community, for such a man 'plows in the slime of wickedness' and 'there are stains on his repentance'. He is not honest in resolving the stubbornness of his heart. On paths of light he sees but darkness. Such a man cannot be reckoned as among those essentially blameless. He cannot be cleared by mere ceremonies of atonement, nor cleansed by any waters of ablution, nor sanctioned by immersion in lakes or rivers, nor purified by any bath. Unclean, unclean he remains so long as he rejects the government of God and refuses the discipline of communion with Him.

For it is only through the spiritual apprehension of God's truth that man's ways can be properly directed. Only thus can all his iniquities be shriven so that he can gaze upon the true light of life. Only through the holy spirit can he achieve union with God's truth and be purged of all his iniquities. Only by a spirit of uprightness and humility can his sin be atoned. Only by the submission of his soul to all the ordinances of God can his flesh be made clean. Only thus can it really be sprinkled with waters of ablution. Only thus can it really be sanctified by waters of purification. And only thus can he really direct his steps to walk blamelessly through all the vicissitudes of his destiny in all the ways of God in the manner which He has commanded, without turning either to the right or to the left and without overstepping any of God's words. Then indeed will he be acceptable before God like an atonement-offering which meets with His pleasure, and then indeed will he be admitted to the covenant of the community for ever.